

LOUIS-ARTHUR RICHARD, LL. D.

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# DO THE FRENCH CANADIANS SPEAK PATOIS ?

TRANSLATED BY  
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## DO THE FRENCH CANADIANS SPEAK PATOIS ?<sup>1</sup>

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It is France who, by her heroism, her tenacity and her endurance, will have been the principal artisan of the victory. At the price of sacrifices of which one does not yet know all, she will have contributed far more dearly than others to save civilization from the cunning German barbarism. It is not, therefore, astonishing that everywhere, from the Neutrals as well as from the Allies, she provokes ardent sympathies, and gives birth to lasting friendships. France is loved; she is admired, probably, as never before. Perhaps she has never so well deserved it as during these bloody years in which her sons gathered a harvest of glory that would suffice to immortalize more than one nation. She is loved and admired, it goes without saying, for her incomparable soldiers, and for all the virtue which, at the hour of sacrifice and immolation, she did not cease to exercise with a touching simplicity; but she is loved equally for her culture so rich and varied, and for her language so supple and beautiful.

Already the countries of the world are making a larger and larger place for her language in their schools, in their universities, and even in all the manifestations of their social life. That so instructive report of the Leathes Commission for example, proves the importance they attach to the knowledge of French in England. This current of universal sympathies in favour of the sweet speech of France ought, therefore, to put an end sooner to the reign of ostracism which our language is submitted to in Canada. In all the Provinces of the Dominion it would seem natural there would be no obstacle to the

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from *La Revue Trimestrielle Canadienne*, February 1919.

expansion of an idiom which, while being that of France, is as much that of the pioneers of this country. Moreover, this idiom is recognized officially by the Constitution which rules us, and is spoken by almost one third of the Canadian population.

However, — an inexplicable fact on the part of a majority whose children fought in such a chivalrous manner to maintain civilization in Europe — it seems it is the contrary that must happen. In the West, particularly, a merciless attack is being prepared against what the Leathes' Report justly calls "the most important language in the history of modern civilization" and "for us (English) assuredly the most important from all points of view".

This testimony, which the English Canadians would have bad taste to reject, is an argument we shall be able to use advantageously in the next contests. Unfortunately, it is not a decisive argument. Our adversaries, rarely short of resources, are going to reply that we do not speak French, but a miserable patois, without literary value and of no practical use. One does not forget the hateful cry of Deputy Morphy: "*Beastly horrible French*". One does not forget, either, the statement of Beaverbrooke in a book every Canadian home makes it a duty to possess: "*Others, again, switched off from English to French Canadian patois*". And how many other calumnies do we not read periodically under the signature of Canadian or of American journalists, some in good faith, but odiously deceived by slanderers whose power cannot be denied! Things have greatly changed during the last fifty years. Formerly, Canadian journalists of English tongue were seen, in a generous outburst, spontaneously defending our language against American writers who dared speak evil of it.<sup>1</sup>

Then, we speak patois, if we must believe these gentlemen of the press. They would probably be at a loss to answer us if we had the audacity to ask them what constitutes a patois. We would not have the pretention

<sup>1</sup> B. Sulte: *La langue française au Canada*, p. 46.

of contesting their knowledge if the point in question were slang or cant which, doubtless, they speak fluently and, even frequently, do not write badly at all, but for the patois...

Litré and Beaujean tell us a patois is "a provincial way of speaking which, being formerly a dialect, has ceased to be literarily cultivated and is no longer in use except for conversation among the people of rural districts, and particularly among peasants and labourers". Is this really the case of our language? Evidently not, since it is literarily cultivated by prosaists and poets whose works have sometimes received kind attention from French critics, and even from the French Academy. We need not establish a distinction between the language we speak and the one we write, since our adversaries do not do so themselves, and since they unite them both in the same contempt.

If we spoke patois, if the French language were not literarily cultivated by us, it is likely that the intellectual ties which unite us to France, would have been severed for ever the very day our political bonds were broken; and the French culture, of our days, would have every chance of being completely foreign to us. But, it is nothing of the kind. Mr. Funck-Brentano, a French scholar who once travelled over our country in a conscientious and intelligent manner, and whose testimony offers our contradictors all guarantee of impartiality, was thus able to write on the occasion of the entry of Roumania in the war: "The French culture in Roumania is really surprising. With the exception of Belgium naturally, and of French Canada, I do not believe there is another country which, from this point of view, can be compared with it".<sup>1</sup> So then, as an important centre of French culture Mr. F. Funck-Brentano puts Canada ahead of Switzerland and where, for example, one never dreamed of considering the language written and spoken by the Romand Swiss as a degenerated French.

<sup>1</sup> *Annales politiques et littéraires*, Paris, 17 sept. 1916, p. 204.

Moreover, if it is true that we habitually employ a patois, it would be useful to know its origin. Where does it come from? To what type is it connected? When and where was it born? Did our fathers bring it with them from France and, in this case, have their descendants piously preserved it? On the other hand, if the ancestral speech was French, have we let ourselves corrupt it, have we committed this fault of reducing it to the rank of a patois?

Let us see for ourselves.

First, it is a fact that French was, at the beginning, the dominating language of the Colony.<sup>1</sup> Officials, soldiers, members of the clergy, the leading class, and even the majority of the Colonists spoke French.<sup>2</sup> Among these last, many, doubtless, did not know French or, at least, knew it imperfectly, but their patois was doomed to a rapid decadence like all patois which are contaminated by a literary language, as modern philologists have been able to scientifically establish.<sup>3</sup> What is more, "the mixing of dialects was to greatly facilitate the evolution of our language towards the French. Mangled and mixed, the patois forms lost their natural vigour; rooted up, strength failed them."<sup>4</sup> In other terms, the effect of mixing various patois is to suppress them if I may use the expression of a Belgian linguist. The patois were bound to be particularly mixed at the beginning of the Colony, when we realize there were some thirty thousand kinds of them still in France a hundred years ago, that is to say, almost as many as "communes"<sup>5</sup> and that, again, our ancestors came from forty provinces, consequently, from an infinitely greater number of "communes".<sup>6</sup>

French imposed itself with such rapidity that La Potherie was already able to write towards the year

<sup>1</sup> Adjutor Rivard : *Parlers de France au Canada*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Tardivel : *La langue française au Canada*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> A. Dauzat : *La langue française d'aujourd'hui*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> A. Rivard : cited, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> A. Dauzat : cited, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Abbé Lortie : *Premier congrès de la langue française au Canada*, p. 8.

1700, "We speak perfectly well here, without a bad accent. Although there is a gathering of people from almost all the provinces of France, the speech of none can be distinguished from that of the Canadians".<sup>1</sup> The first historian of New France, Father Charlevoix, said for his part in 1722 "Nowhere do they speak our language more purely; one does not even notice an accent".<sup>2</sup> A few years before the Cession, Abbé d'Olivet had written nearly the same thing.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Montcalm declared in his *Journal* (p. 64) that "the Canadian peasants speak French very well".

So then, most of our ancestors spoke French, at least those who came from the Isle of France, Touraine, and Orléans where, quoting Littré, there was no real patois.<sup>4</sup> As to the others, they were not slow to realize the necessity in which they found themselves of knowing the language of the majority which, moreover, was that of the Administration.

Jean-Baptiste is ingenious. He found the secret of transforming the descendants of the eight or nine thousand French emigrants who came two or three centuries ago to seek their fortunes on the banks of the St-Lawrence, into one people of three million inhabitants. Those who are disconsolate at not recognizing the Parisian French in our speech, no doubt think he is very capable, in addition, of having given birth to a patois. Unfortunately, from a linguistic point of view, Jean-Baptiste is far from having been as fecund as he could have been and should have been. Certainly, he created words to designate things not found in France, and which are essentially Canadian, but the list is not important. Most of them, however, are so pretty and characteristic that they do not fail to do honor to the good taste of Jean Baptiste, and it is regrettable that he did not use more extensively the right he had of creating them. For he indisputably

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by B. Sulte, op. cited p. 14

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Tardivel, op. cited p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Bulletin du Parler français*, vol. IV, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by M. Napoléon Le Gendre : *La langue française au Canada*, p. 83.

had this right, and, had he not had it, he would have been able to assume it, very simply, by virtue of the same privilege that club men, theatrical people, financiers, or sportsmen create Parisian slang of which certain words end at least in receiving the consecration of the French People if not of the French Academy itself. Would our language have deserved to be defended so passionately if it had not had the suppleness to adapt itself to all the conditions of the surroundings where it found itself transplanted, if it had been able to designate only by means of periphrases what we agreed to call "la sucrerie, la poudrerie, la brunnante, les bordages..."?

If there is a reproach one could make to Jean Baptiste, it is rather to have been too often satisfied to frenchify certain English words to express new things. Also, he was wrong to borrow from the language of his neighbor that which he could have created with the resources of his own tongue. But, like many others, Jean Baptiste liked to practise the theory of the least effort. He followed, in this regard, the example of his French cousins who, themselves also, have been cultivating anglomania. How many English words have little by little crept into the language and are today in daily use in France! As Mr. François Veuillot<sup>1</sup> so cleverly remarked last winter, "We can no longer go out without practising "footing"; we can no longer go to an evening party without putting on our "smoking"; we can no longer travel without taking a "sleeping"; we can no longer rock except in a "rocking-chair". "Although the fact may seem paradoxical, — writes Albert Dauzat, a learned French philologist in *La Langue Française d'aujourd'hui*, p. 75, — the borrowings from the English language are sometimes less frequent in Canada than in France: the Canadians say a *carré* and not a *square*, a *char* and not a *wagon*, an *entrevue* and not an *interview*."

But one wrong does not cure another and if France was at fault in adopting such a considerable number

<sup>1</sup> Mr François Veuillot, a noted Parisian journalist and author who visited Canada in 1918.

of English words, it does not follow that we were right. Quite the contrary, and we shall pay much more dearly than our ancient mother country for our imprudence in not sufficiently protecting our language. The more so because we have not only borrowed words from the English language, but expressions and figures not in the genius of our language. Since the days of Tardivel, anglicism has not ceased to be the enemy that must be fought stubbornly. But this enemy, be it ever so insinuating, has not yet succeeded in transforming the ancestral tongue into a new language which, near or far, is allied to patois, and English writers have no right to judge our language from the jargon the poet Drummond puts in the mouth of his "Habitant". And, after all, why does one not realize that this "habitant", devoid of instruction, endeavors merely to speak a language not his own, and tortures his mind trying to make himself understood by the Englishmen or the Americans with whom he enters into conversation! There is, perhaps, more malice than one thinks in the work of Drummond. But there are men on whose heads irony glances like water on a duck's back. Decidedly, it is a fortitude to feel one's self above ridicule! It could not be otherwise but that our idiom felt the influence of the English language, and it is marvelous to find that it could have so energetically resisted the surrounding forces. For English is not only the language of a large portion of the Canadian population, it is also that of the mother country, it is the language of our powerful neighbours to the South, it is the language of industry, of commerce and of finance, it is the language of Parliament such as we have had for over a century, and it has been the language of the Administration for a long time. Since we have, ourselves, submitted to English and, above all, to American ideas and habits, how could our language have escaped this influence? Rémy de Gourmont, whose high ability on the subject of Philology is well known, wrote somewhere in his "*Esthétique de la langue française*": "It is a well known fact that the french language of Canada has suffered from english influence. This reciprocating penetration is much less

deep rooted than one would be apt to think. Notwithstanding, our language across the sea because of its expansive force retains its creative vitality, and a remarkable power of assimilation. Words which it has borrowed from the english language, either remain on the surface only, and retain their foreign appearance or, as is more often the case, have been absorbed into the language and have really become french by this usage".

English words which became necessary have been disguised to such an extent as to become unrecognizable and thus we have kept up the best traditions of the language. Such at least is the statement of Rémy de Gourmont who did not fear to set as an example to the French philologists the formation of words in the franco-canadian language.

Except for Canadianisms and Anglicisms, Jean Baptiste was content preserving, with a jealous care, the old linguistic patrimony in all its integrity. As a result we still use certain archaic words which we are reproached for having kept under the pretext that they are no longer current in France. Useless reproach, truly, since such words have not ceased to be French, and are met frequently in the writings of authors of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, who were the best artisans of the French language. One meets them again under the pen of writers as modern as Messrs Brunetière and Faguet,<sup>1</sup> not to mention others. If some of these words are no longer in the dictionary of the Academy, their French origin is not dubious, as according to the expression of Oscar Dunn, they prove our origin and are excellent certificates of nationality. (*Glossaire* p. XX.)

Would it not be apropos to call to mind here the opinion which the illustrious French savant, Mr. Élisée Reclus, expressed to Napoléon Legendre about thirty years ago on the subject of our good old words? "In your language", he said, "our French of the old country again finds many expressions it should have kept, it will also find some which another centre has forced you to

<sup>1</sup> Members of the French Academy.

create and which science claims".<sup>1</sup> Mr. Faguet concluded thus in the *Gaulois*,<sup>2</sup> an article he dedicated, not long ago, to French speaking people : "1st. — The language they speak, like all excentric languages, that is to say, far from the centre, has every chance in the world of being excellent because it is composed of archaisms. Such is the French of Geneva, of Lausanne, and such is the French of Canada. Let them not distrust their provincialisms too much... 2nd. Let them be persuaded that everything from the 17th century, even if it has fallen into desuetude, is excellent, is French of good stock, of good standard and irreprehensible. 3rd. Whatever comes from the 18th century is always dubious. 4th. Whatever comes from the 19th century is no authority by itself and must be verified by looking to the 17th century for reference. 5th. Finally, the worst language of France is the one spoken in Paris."

Those whose delicate ears are offended by our archaic language and who chide us on this subject, would do well not to forget that our fathers left France two or three centuries ago, that we have been separated from them for one hundred and fifty years and that, down to the middle of the last century, we had not the slightest contact with our ancient mother country. We were left to our own strength and resources. The importation of French books to Canada was even severely prohibited during three fourths of the century following the Cession.<sup>3</sup> If, in spite of all these obstacles, Jean Baptiste had not lovingly and jealously conserved his tongue, the writers of France would not find, as they do with naive astonishment the survival of their language on the banks of the St-Lawrence, and would not celebrate what one of them has justly called "the Canadian miracle". It is possible, after all, that the French Canadians do not speak a patois as one sometimes hears, but it is certain they have not the French accent. Mr. François Veuillot did justice to the

<sup>1</sup> N. Legendre, op. cited p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Le Bulletin du Parler français*, vol. 1, p. 86. The *Gaulois*, a leading daily paper, Paris.

<sup>3</sup> Abbé Camille Roy : *Nos origines littéraires*, p. 23.

above affirmation, "I would like, first to hear someone define the French accent for me. I know the Parisian accent well and, still, I know that the accent of Faubourg Saint-Germain is not the same as that of Montmartre. I also know the Norman accent, the Alsatian, and the Marseillais. It is possible that there is a Canadian accent, and this would merely be the accent of another province of France".<sup>1</sup> In fact, each province of France has its particular accent; the Swiss and Belgians have, likewise, their own. Could our adversaries tell us the exact place where French is spoken with this savour they reproach us for not having? Apropos of our accent, would I be permitted to give the opinion of a French writer who knew our country well and wrote a deeply compiled book on the history of Canada? This is what Mr. Eugène Révilaud wrote some years ago, "The language of the first (cultivated class) does not differ from that which is spoken in the polished society of our country, and it is better protected against the invasion of Parisian slang. . . . As to the people, it seems to me, taking it all in all, they speak French more correctly than the generality of our peasants. . . . The language of the Canadians seemed to me extremely pure of accent and there is no doubt that a Canadian of average culture coming to Paris would get in tune more easily with the French Theatre which, rightly or wrongly, has the reputation of being the seat of the traditions of pure French pronunciation, than a Picard or a Franc-Comtois, not to speak of the Gascons, the Auvergnats or the Provençaux."<sup>2</sup>

Are the journalists who accuse us of speaking an old and degenerated language, good judges in the matter? Do they know French sufficiently to express such a severe judgment against us? We do not think so, and they would do more useful work, perhaps, in attempting to purify the English used in certain Provinces of the Dominion, and what Lord Grey one day likened to a most detestable and

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Le Soleil*, Québec, March 1st 1918.

<sup>2</sup> *Histoire du Canada*, p. 523.

less comprehensible slang.<sup>1</sup> If there is anyone qualified to criticise with discernment the language of Jean Baptiste, it is he whose maternal tongue is French, and not certain graduates of high schools who have only a superficial knowledge of the French language and, most of the time, do not even understand it. Well, what do the French of France, who have visited Canada and have come in contact with our people, say of the French Canadian patois? May I be excused if, in multiplying quotations, I seem to abuse the privilege? But, is there a more efficient way of forcing silence upon our adversaries than to make them face a number of undeniable testimonies coming only from those really qualified to appreciate the value of our language?

Xavier Marmier, of the French Academy, wrote in 1866, "They keep in the practice of our language in Canada, that elegance, that sort of atticism of the Great Century. The people themselves speak it quite correctly, and have no patois".<sup>2</sup> Rameau de Saint-Père, the historian of "la France aux Colonies" wrote for his part, "On the banks of the St-Lawrence our language has no more degenerated than our character".<sup>3</sup> Ampère, the great French savant, also wrote, "To find living again in the language, the traditions of the Great Century, one must go to Canada".<sup>4</sup> H. de Lamotte, the novel-writer who enchanted our childhood, wrote in 1879, "One soon hears the sweet speech of France, enhanced and not depreciated, by a peculiar accent. . . One understands that an isolation of one hundred years has preserved the integrity of the language and its expressions in use during the first half of the eighteenth century".<sup>5</sup> Mr. Christophe

<sup>1</sup> An English periodical, *The Saturday Review* stated, on March the 15th 1919, in an article entitled *The Decline of English* "The language is horribly stuffed with unintelligible slang from America and the Colonies. A dramatically familiar form of address is adopted in writing, and everything is contracted. . . The deterioration of the English language. . . is even more noticeable in the United States and the Colonies."

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres sur l'Amérique*, vol. I p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> *La France aux colonies*, vol. II, p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> *Promenades en Amérique*, vol. I, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> *Cinq mois chez les Français d'Amérique*, p. 29.

Allart wrote in 1880, "It is a pleasure to talk with the "habitants" and to hear that good French speech without any patois, even elegant, but with a very curious archaic tournure".

Mr. Victor Du Bled, one of the collaborators of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Paris, wrote in this excellent review of February 15th, 1885, "It can be affirmed with all the serious travellers who have visited this country (Canada) that the Canadians still speak the French of the 16th and 17th centuries, that so savory and robust language of Touraine and the Isle of France, with its special character and Gallic *tournures*. One finds again in that idiom, numerous original expressions, old coin struck with a good die, dating from Rabelais and Montaigne, which we could use to advantage although they are not recorded in the dictionary of the Academy. Moreover, there does not exist, as was thoughtlessly expressed, a Canadian patois, and except for the intonation, the inhabitants who come out of the primary schools express themselves more correctly than our workers and peasants". Mr. Gailly de Taurines wrote, in 1891, in his book, "*La Nation Canadienne*" : "In a general way, it can be said the popular language of the Canadians is infinitely better and more correct than that of France".<sup>1</sup> Viscount Robert de Caix, "one who has most closely observed Canada" in the opinion of the former French consul at Montreal, wrote in 1904 in the "*Revue des questions diplomatiques et coloniales*" : "Among the educated people of Canada, the language is excellent, and of very good form among the inhabitants of the rural districts, exclusively French".

Doctor Labori, the great French barrister, on his return to Paris after a few months visit in Canada, wrote in *Je sais tout* of March 15, 1914, "The scorn many Englishmen and Americans have for the French of our Canadian brothers is very amusing. In Canada, the French language is distinguished by a rather marked native accent which is not that of Normandie, Picardie,

<sup>1</sup> Page 246.

Champagne or Poitou, but, at the same time, participates of all. There is no more authentic French than this savory language, piously preserved by the sons of the first Colonists. No doubt some modern expressions translated from the English, and some peculiarities of pronunciation disparage it a little for us, but the general effect is charming and full of attraction, above all, to a Frenchman. In one sense, the language of Canada, with what it preserves of archaism, and although a little rustic, is perhaps more truly French than even that of the boulevards, being handed down without noticeable alteration from ancestors, many, of whom, came from our country districts. But many Englishmen who allow themselves to be deceived by appearances, and fail to perceive the charm so appealing to us, joke placidly about it. On the boat one of them said to me in a barbarous French he believed to be very elegant, "You will see; they speak French very badly in Canada. When I am in Quebec, they take me for a Parisian." This agreeable man, although no fool, had no idea how comical his naive remark was. I felt the full ridicule of it when, hardly disembarked at Quebec and speaking to the wharfingers, coachmen and customs officers, I could at once easily believe myself in the heart of France, at Poitiers, Rouen, Tours or Besançon".

Mr. J. J. Jusserand, the French ambassador at Washington, wrote not long ago, "The language of the Canadians and the Frenchmen is the same, both being French... No, there is no possible doubt, and I have had too numerous occasions of hearing their speeches and of talking with them not to be convinced : the cradles of Quebec and Montreal and those of Paris, Lyons or Orléans hear the same sounds falling from the mothers' lips, hear the same language — French — of which those who speak it have the right to be proud since a thousand years".<sup>1</sup> Mr. René Viviani, the well known French statesman, said in a lecture at Paris on January 18th, 1918, "They (French Canadians) have helped to maintain, among them, that which is the noblest and most beautiful among us — the

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Le Devoir*, January 19th 1918.

French language, marvelous instrument of National unity... It is that language of the 17th century, so pure and which was since overloaded, perhaps, with neologisms; it is that language which, as in a marvelous and remote conservatory, has been preserved in its limpid purity as it was spoken by our fathers".<sup>1</sup>

Captain Duthoit, one of the most distinguished professors of Lille University, wrote very recently, "The Canadians have the highest degree of cult in their language. They speak very pure French, even in the rural districts".<sup>2</sup> The former consul of France in Canada, M. C. E. Bonin, said at a farewell banquet on the 23rd of last September, "The French Canadians represent the strongest heterogeneous element outside of France, and Montreal — although many ignore it — is the fourth French city in the world, after Paris, Marseille and Lyon".<sup>3</sup>

Flattering reports, too flattering, one may say. Possibly so. But since we have enemies who exaggerate our faults at pleasure, why should we not have friends who feel inclined to exaggerate our qualities? And why, also, should we not oppose the opinion of the latter to that of the former? We cannot hope to convince all these latter, but if some of them are sincere, perhaps we will succeed in opening their eyes to the truth. As to the others, those who have not even ignorance for an excuse, their prejudices are ineradicable. Hatred is more often the motive of their attacks against us, and as Bourget says "when one man hates another, he almost always ends in seeing him such as his hatred wants him to be". Then, our enemies, to attain their ends, want to see in us only an almost dessicated branch of the vigorous and admirable French trunk. The day they will have succeeded to root this opinion in the Anglo-Saxon heart, and to discredit us entirely, the hour of iniquity will have sounded, the idea contained in the well known formula will be realized and Canada will inevitably become the country of one language, as she is already the country of one flag and one king.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Le Canada*, Montréal, February 28th 1918.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Le Droit*, Ottawa, August 27th 1918.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *The Montreal Gazette*, September 23rd 1918.

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